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Managing change and transitions: a comparison of different models and their commonalities

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this article is to analyze the commonalities of various change and transition models developed over time to assist with and support managing organizational change. Design/methodology/approach – The article provides an examination of change and transition models through a review of relevant literature and the comparison of different models.

Findings – Each change and transition model has similar methods of handling change. Their unique methods and strategies provide additional insights into possible applications to most organizations. In some cases, models could be combined to form new models to best fit the circumstances of the organization.

Practical implications – This comparison can assist individuals in evaluating and selecting the model based on organizational need while remembering to focus on both the physical and the emotional changes in an organization.
Originality/value – The article shows that human resource managers can benefit from learning the commonalities between change and transition models when considering what will work for their organization in conjunction with the review of a number of well known and relevant models.

Keywords Human resource management, Organizational change, Leadership, Change management, Adaptability

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Change is evident everywhere from the simplest everyday changes to the most difficult situations encountered by human resource (HR) managers as management grapples with reorganizations, downsizing and/or cutbacks. A crucial factor in the effectiveness of an organization is the ability to adapt to change

(French and Delahaye, 1996). According to Bridges and Mitchell (2000) "Business conditions change and yesterday's assumptions and practices no longer work".

While it may seem uncommon to some, most businesses are told they have to change everything from the way they think to the way they work (Nortier, 1995). Wagar (2000) provides a bit of history by reminding us of how downsizing became an obsession in the 1990s, the phrase "lean and mean" became a primary focus of most businesses at that time. Whether the success of downsizing tactics worked is not the topic for discussion here, however, the tactics employed at the time are part of this comparison. Today's economic crisis has also added the new dimension of change needing to be immediate instead of over a period of time. Add increased global competition, outsourcing, fast changing and new technologies and you have a recipe for massive confusion to those involved in such a volatile environment.

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Literature review

When beginning a review of studies surrounding change models, it was discovered that much time and energy has been devoted to bring about a better understanding of change as it relates to organizations. While this topic has been looked at from various disciplines, this article will only touch on some of the many change and transition models, which organizations have to choose from as they work through their particular organization change.

An awareness of the need for change is the beginning of the whole change process (Armstrong, 2006). A complete assessment of the current situation is necessary to begin the process of implementing any kind of change in an organization. Unfortunately, this kind of assessment may take longer than management or stakeholders have if the situation is very serious. What happened to bring about the need for change? What kind of issues and problems have occurred to bring about this crisis are questions which need to be answered as this helps to determine the best course of action to follow. Which change and/or transition model will fit the organization?

Another facet within change models are the individuals involved in working together to implement change. Ulrich and Brockbank (2005) provide some insights to this element of the equation by pointing out how "high-performing HR professionals make change happen successfully and thoroughly with their most critical contribution being to make sure the change happens quickly". Just how involved the HR professional has to be for a successful change is up to the organization. There are a variety of reasons their involvement is imperative to the success of any type of change. Additionally, their familiarity with the organization's culture and employees becomes a great asset to the individuals responsible for organizing changes. This is most significant in a change process as follow through skills become extremely valuable and adds to the facilitation of all types of organizational change.

Taking a step back to change itself, various studies have revealed additional strategies concerning the very nature of change and how it relates to organizations. Kanter (1985) relates how organizations have to be able to adapt to change or face the possibility of losing out to competition. Kanter (1985) further expounds on how some in top management attempt to force change by just simply dictating it, changing polices without warning and expecting their middle management to take charge and make the change work. These experiences reflect how strategic-planning models are only a piece of the change process, which usually results in some sort of modifications to work with an individual organization.

Burke (2004) looks at where the organizational development field is in 2004, and expresses how difficult it is to move forward without the knowledge of what is coming. Burke's (2004) review of what is now known (in 2004) evaluates change processes and points out some of the change models which will be covered further in this article. Additionally, change effort is now enhanced with the aid of training and feedback. Burke's (2004) comments bring out how any value-based change effort requires effective leadership and a business structure which includes strategy, mission plans and a model. When a change model is used in conjunction with the business structure it has a better chance of success and is part of the eight-step change model from Kotter (1995) where "to work together as a team united in the vision," is necessary for success.

Axelrod (2001) reminds us of how change management and models came to the point of unleashing the power of employees. Previous studies conducted by Kurt Lewin during World War II revealed how allowing input from employees when changes were needed added to acceptance of the changes with a bonus of increased productivity. These studies were conducted with surveys and working together to review the collected data which resulted in better change solutions. Axelrod (2001) further explains there needs to be a new paradigm involving more people and widening the circle of involvement.

Dannemiller and Norlin (2001) have developed a different approach altogether calling it a whole-scale change where the business comes together to connect the collective wisdom of the organization creating the one brain and one heart methodology. This process brings in individuals from all levels of the organization to create the alignment needed for success. The additional touch of requiring high performance brings this model in line with another change model introduced by Quinn (2006).

Following the path of working together, Schein(2004) uses the term "culture" and shows how it is extremely important to investigate and study the culture of an organization in order to work with them in a more cohesive manner. This very notion of knowing the culture of the organization is the responsibility of the leaders in order to determine how to lead or Schein (2004) says the "culture will lead them" making any change model more difficult to implement.

Evans and Ward (2004) remind us how managers are in the position of needing to "be prepared for two types of change-planned and imposed". New managers are under pressure to make a good impression and feel like they have to implement change correctly and operating under an unexpected or forced change can cause great difficulties with staff. While change can be risky and is time-consuming, careful preparation can enhance the process. Managers tackle the situation of how most people do not enjoy change, but somehow, because change must happen, individuals will adjust over time with the right people in management.

Beer et al. (1990) conducted studies of change programs with 12 different companies and discovered how most do not work unless everyone is involved and on board. Beer et al. (1990) determined that "effective corporate renewal starts at the bottom, through informal efforts to solve problems". Their studies revealed how senior officials can be committed to change and have to foster a climate of change instead of mandating the changes from the top as may have been done in the past. They also discovered how all departments and mangers need to be involved or the whole process can break down.

Additional organizational change studies were conducted by Dunphy and Stace (1993) to show how no one model is universally applicable. They point out how "turbulent times demand different responses in varied circumstances, so managers and consultants need a model of change that is essentially a situational or contingency model". Dunphy and Stace (1988) developed a contingency model using a combination of leadership styles and different types of changes. Identifying the optimum mix of leadership and change styles, while considering the organization, is what makes the change successful.

Bridges and Mitchell (2000) provide what they call a new model for change. They remind us how, over the years, a large amount of time and effort has been spent in studying the management of change and yet it seems to have fallen short in providing the much needed solutions to the economical situations organizations find themselves in today as they work through a variety of necessary changes for survival. While change is not an easy or simple process, many still operate today as if it is and fail to understand why a business is unable to create a plan and follow it through successfully. Bridges and Mitchell (2000) point out "most leaders imagine that transition is automatic – that it occurs simply because the change is happening. But it doesn't". The human element of change needs to be addressed for change to be successful.

Kotter and Cohen (2002) have put together a collection of success stories using Kotter's famous eight-step change model from 1996 as well as situations which could be considered failures. In the book, Kotter and Cohen (2002) point out the reasons for success are "[b]ecause their most central activity does not center on formal data gathering, analysis, report writing, and presentations . . . instead, they compellingly show people what the problems are and how to resolve the problems". It is this kind of process that goes a long way into creating successful organizational changes. This change model will be discussed in this article.

Change and transition models

Lewin

One of the earliest change models was developed by Kurt Lewin. According to Burnes (2004) and Armstrong (2006) this model is referred to as the "3-Step Model" developed in 1947 and referenced in his Field Theory in Social Science (Lewin, 1951). This model breaks change down into three steps: unfreezing, changing, and refreezing, Armstrong (2006) provides greater detail to this process as follows:

- Unfreezing – is altering the present stable equilibrium which supports existing behaviors and attitudes. This process must take account of the inherent threats that change presents to people and the need to motivate those affected to attain the natural state of equilibrium by accepting change.
- Changing – developing new responses based on new information.
- Refreezing – stabilizing the change by introducing the new responses into the personalities of those concerned (Armstrong, 2006).

This could be compared to overcoming bad habits by replacing them with new and better habits. The individual, like an organization, has to be resolved and committed to make the change and do what is necessary regardless of any inconveniences involved in the process. The end goal is to succeed with the change.

Burnes (2004) points out that Lewin is one of the early pioneers of group dynamics and how individuals will usually go along with the group norm whether it is a positive or negative situation or actions. Armstrong (2006) adds how "Lewin suggests a methodology for analyzing change which is called 'field force analyses'" and involves the following:

- Analyzing the restraining or driving forces will affect the transition to the future state; these restraining forces will include the reactions of those who see change as unnecessary or as a constituting a threat.
- Assessing which of the driving or restraining forces are critical.
- Taking steps both to increase the critical driving forces and to decrease the critical restraining forces (Armstrong, 2006).

How does this apply to an organizational change? Ritchie (2006) sheds some light on how an organization can apply this to a change situation. The unfreezing is the time process required to prepare for change, to help the staff accept the coming change, and break down the status quo found through the evaluation completed leading up to the realization that changes were necessary for survival. This will force the organization to take a hard and difficult look at their very essence. Ritchie (2004) calls this a "controlled crisis" which adds the needed motivation to make a change. 245

Once the change is set in motion, individual workers may have to find new ways to accomplish their jobs, whether they are the same jobs in new locations or new jobs in the same locations. Once the workers have accepted these changes they easily support and adjust to the change. In Johnson's (1998) Who Moved My Cheese?, the character Haw realizes he needs to move on and accept his situation making the best of it, while Hem refuses to change and just remains in his same state. This is often what happens in an organization when certain individuals refuse to accept the changes while others move on and work through them.

Richie (2004) states refreezing is at the point when there is a new stable organization, people are accepting the reorganization by working through the new methods and ways of accomplishing daily tasks. Once this occurs, confidence in the business increases and there is usually a new sense of hope and the future looks brighter for all in the new organization. It is at this point when refreezing should take place. A celebration of the new organizations should be held. This allows everyone to feel appreciated for their part in the success of the change. (Remembering change is cyclical and may have to be addressed again in the future.)

Beckhard

Richard Beckhard (1969) developed a change program, which incorporates the following processes (as cited in Armstrong, 2006):

- Setting goals and defining the future state or organizational conditions desired after the change.
- Diagnosing the present condition in relations to these goals.
- Defining the transition state activities and commitments required to meet the future state.
- Developing strategies and action plans for managing this transition in the light of an analysis of the factors likely to affect the introduction of change.

Depending on the circumstance, an organization may receive the latest quarterly reports and realize that change is required in order to survive or successfully contend with their existing or future competition. A business's staff can work together to plan and implement change using this program.

To breakdown this change program further, Rouda and Kusy Jr (1995) provide Beckhard's definition of organizational development; it is "[a]n effort, planned, organization-wide, and managed from the top, to increase organization effectiveness and health through planned interventions in the organization's process, using behavioral-science knowledge". This explanation provides additional insights in how the change program can be used in a business setting.

Looking at this change program with this added definition helps to show how it can be applied in a business or organizational setting when change is imminent. According to Rouda and Kusy Jr (1995), this model:

> [t]akes a long-range approach to improving performance and efficiency in an organization by looking at the total organization, adding the necessary support from top management by implementing it themselves along with tying it to the bottom-line. Next apply incremental changes over a period of time while involving the individuals in the business providing them an opportunity to make a positive contribution.

Additionally, Marshak (2004) states "The whole idea of planned change assumes, in essence, that it is possible to determine rationally how to initiate and implement actions to achieve and then maintain a predetermined, desired future state". While these steps are not always applied in the correct order, they all need to happen for change to be successful.

Thurley

A third change model described in Armstrong (2006) was introduced by K. Thurley (1979) and has five main strategies to managing change: "Directive, bargained, hearts and minds, analytical and action-based". Each strategy has advantages and disadvantages for all parties involved. The primary starting point is to recognize the need for change in an organization. An in depth review of each strategy is valuable when determining if and when there is any commonality with each of the change models discussed in this article exists and whether access to particular strategies will aid or hinder the success of the organizational change. Both Armstrong (2006) and Lockitt (2004) provide ample explanations of each strategy.

- Directive – "the imposition of change in crisis situations or when other methods have failed. This is done by the exercise of managerial power without consultation" (Armstrong, 2006). "The advantage here is that change can be undertaken quickly, however, the disadvantage is it does not take into consideration any views, or feelings, of those involved in the change" (Lockitt, 2004).
- Bargained – "this approach recognizes that power is shared between employer and the employed and that change requires negotiation, compromise and agreement before being implemented" (Armstrong, 2006). "[w]illingness by senior managers to negotiate and bargain in order to effect change. This approach acknowledges that those affected by change have the right to have a say in what changes are made, with disadvantages being the additional time to effect change" (Lockitt, 2004).

- Hearts and minds – “an all-embracing thrust to change the attitudes, values and beliefs of the whole workforce. This normative approach seeks commitment and a shared vision but does not necessarily include involvement or participation” (Armstrong, 2006). This strategy allows “full support of the changes being made and a shared set of organizational values that individuals are willing and able to support. Again the advantage is the positive commitment to the changes being made with the disadvantages being that it takes longer to implement” (Lockitt, 2004).
- Analytical – “a theoretical approach proceeds sequentially from the analysis and diagnosis of the situation, through the setting of objectives, the design of the change process, the evaluation of the results and, the determination of the objectives for the next stage in the process” (Armstrong, 2006).

Action-based – “this recognizes that the way managers behave in practice bears little resemblance to the analytical, theoretical model. The distinction between managerial thought and managerial action blurs in practice to the point of invisibility. What managers think is what they do. Real life often results in a ‘ready’, ‘aim’, and ‘fire’ approach” (Armstrong, 2006). “This strategy stresses full involvement of all those involved, and affected by, the anticipated changes. Benefits of this approach are that any changes made are more likely to be supported due to the involvement of all those affected, the commitment of individuals and groups within the organization as they all feel ownership over the changes being made, the disadvantages are the time it takes before changes are made” (Lockitt, 2004).

Each of these strategies can be analyzed extensively, used independently or in combination in a manner appropriate for an organization. There may be situations arise which may require methods from one strategy mixed with methods from a different strategy to support a successful model for a particular business. Lockitt (2004) points out how “the skill of effective change management is to recognize what strategies to employ, when, where and how to use them in order to be most effective”, this can be an individual from human resources, management or a hired change agent.

Often change models neglect the transition that is required to occur within the individuals in the organization during the actual change process. It is important to include this human element in the change process. Nortier (1995) explains how Bridges (1986) “considers transition as a dynamic in three stages”. Bridges and Mitchell (2000) have labeled these three stages as:

Endings, the neutral zone (explorations), and new beginnings. Often, in the whole course of action, whether using a change model or not, the benefits of a change are presented, plans are designed and implemented in coordination with managers, policies, technical changes and budgets leaving out one of the most important aspects, the individuals who will be affected by the changes (Nortier, 1995).

Bridges

Another thought on this is provided by Bridges (1991) in the statement “it isn’t the changes that do you in, it is the transitions”. In an earlier paper by Bridges (1986), he also points out how “change is the current corporate landscape is the rule rather than the exception”. It is worth noting that in 2009 this is still the rule. Further explanations of the three stages are as follows:

- The Ending Phase – Saying goodbye to the way things were, a particular job, associates, a location, even a manager or supervisor can all be changed when realignment happens in an organization.
- The Neutral Zone – New environment, new responsibilities, the rules have changed, there are different people to work with and report to, this can all be unsettling as one explores and experiments in this new setting.
- New Beginnings – This period requires the final adjustment to new ways of doing many different tasks or even similar tasks but in handling them in a new manner (Bridges and Mitchell, 2000).

The last phase is often when individuals lose it all hope; they freeze and cannot move forward. This is mentioned earlier in this article in reference to Who Moved My Cheese? (Johnson, 1998). Three of the four characters eventually make it to this last phase, but

one, Hem, is unable to move beyond his fears, and eventually, he is left behind. Organizational change models need to incorporate transitions in their plans to improve the success rate of their upcoming change.

Kotter

Kotter (2007) states “Leaders who successfully transform businesses do eight things right (and they do them in the right order)”. Kotter’s original article by the same title published in 1995 soon became a must read for organizational leaders planning and implementing change. Kotter (1996) states while change efforts have helped improve some organizations in the competitive markets, many situations have been disappointing and the results have been disastrous for the employees and those in charge. Kotter points out “the biggest mistake people make when trying to change organizations is to plunge ahead without establishing a high enough sense of urgency in fellow managers and employees”. The thought that this could not happen to our organization is one of the main causes of failure while instituting organizational change. Some changes take years and even after a number of years, they may fail for a variety of reasons.

Armstrong (2006) goes through his eight steps as follows:

1. Establishing a sense of urgency
    1. Examining market and competitive realities
    2. Identifying and discussing crises, potential crises, or major opportunities
2. Forming a powerful guiding coalition
    1. Assembling a group with enough power to lead the change effort
    2. Encouraging the group to work together as a team
3. Creating a vision
    1. Creating a vision to help direct the change effort
    2. Developing strategies for achieving that vision
4. Communicating the vision
    1. Using every vehicle possible to communicate the new vision and strategies
    2. Teaching new behaviors by the example of the guiding coalition
5. Empowering others to act on the vision

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a. b. c.

Getting rid of obstacles to change
Changing systems or structures that seriously undermine the vision Encourage risk taking and non-traditional ideas, activities and actions

6. Planning for and creating short-term wins

a. b. c.

Planning for visible performance improvement
Creating those improvements
Recognizing and rewarding employees involved in the improvements

7. Consolidating improvements and producing still more change

a.

b. c.

Using increased credibility to change systems, structures and polices that don’t fit the vision

Hiring, promoting and developing employees who can implement the vision Reinvigorating the process with new projects, themes and change agents

8. Institutionalizing new approaches

1. Articulating the connections between the new behaviors and corporate success
2. Developing the means to ensure leadership development and succession (Armstrong, 2006).

It is interesting to note here how Kotter has managed to bring together the change models and transitions into an eight step process. In The Heart of Change (Kotter and Cohen, 2002) these eight steps are linked to 34 real life organizations located throughout the world. The book is structured around these specific eight steps because “this is how people experience the process” (Kotter and Cohen, 2002). Both books provide case studies showing what works and what usually does not work. Kotter (2007) also reviews what happens when these eight steps are not followed in the correct order or in the correct way. The old adage of “this is the way we do things around here” is very difficult to overcome, but is very necessary to change when dealing with having to change a culture.

Kotter (2007) states “his basic goal has been the same: to make fundamental changes in how business is conducted in order to help cope with a new, more challenging market environment”. This goal is evident as Kotter (2007) reviews what happens when these steps are not followed:

1.

2. 3. 4.

5.

6.

7.

8.

Not establishing a Great Enough Sense of Urgency

1. Transformation or changes begin but are frozen and can't move forward
2. Complacency has set in preventing any change from going forward

Not creating a powerful enough guiding coalition
a. When just a few people are not supported by more along the way, their efforts are

lost, major players need to be involved or the change will never get off the ground Lacking a vision

a. Without a clear vision, the whole effort can fall apart as individuals struggle to be a part of something not understood by the larger population

Under communicating the vision by a factor of ten

a. Everyone needs to be kept in the loop throughout the whole process using every possible means of communication available from meetings to emails and everything else in between. The management and the employees need to be in sync with each other, lack of communication can prevent major successes causing the whole plan to fail

Not removing obstacles to the new vision

a. Everyone has to be working together to make this new vision a reality, keeping those who refuse to change need to be replaced or it will fail.

Not systematically planning for, and creating, short-term wins

a. Change takes time; people lose momentum and need to be congratulated when evidence shows that the changes are going forward successfully

Declaring victory to soon

a. Some changes can take anywhere from five to ten years, premature victory celebrations can kill momentum and ruin the whole change

Not anchoring changes in the corporations culture

a. Making the new changes the way things are now done shows that the change is most likely to stay, however, if this is not happening and most things beyond the surface don't really change then the change has failed (Kotter, 2007).

It is crucial for successful change to help individuals adjust to the ever-changing business world and keep communication lines open at all times while maintaining the organization's vision during the change process. When these strategies are implemented, taking everyone into consideration, than change is more likely to be completely successful.

Commonalities

Conclusions

Table I shows clearly there are significant commonalities between these particular change and transition models. It is interesting to note that is while they are not all lined up they each handle change in a similar fashion. All these models are just guides to assist organizations through the world of constant change which exists today. While no one exact and perfect model exists for everyone, each has positive ways to handle change and can be adapted according to the organization. It must also be remembered that change is constant. If an organization makes a set of changes successfully, it should be noted that one Kotter's (1996) eight steps is to keep improving, going forward with new and more innovative ways to compete in the market by adding new products, always looking for new ways to handle situations and keep the vision going by adding new people as the organization continues to grow.

Senge (1990) points out how "from an early age we are taught to break apart problems, to fragment the world". If problems are broken down too soon or too quickly perspective is lost and there are times when stepping back and seeing the whole situation first is very beneficial and usually necessary. In an organizational environment, creating a sense of urgency or mandating a directive because market forces have caused great economic upheaval, it is prudent to step back, take a look at the whole situation, analyze the problems, develop a plan of action with support and proceed to unfreeze, work with the employees, managers, directors and stockholders in creating a complete environment where everyone feels ownership of the both the problems and the solutions. This creates a solid foundation for any organization to

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Table I.

Lewin Unfreezing

Changing

Refreezing

Beckhard
Analyzing present condition

Setting goals for the future Plan of action

Implementing the plan

Thurley

Directive Bargained Hearts and Minds

Analytical

Action- based

Bridges

Ending phase Neutral zone

New beginnings

Kotter

Sense of urgency
Form guiding coalition
Have powerful group to lead change effort

Work together as a team

Create a vision
Communicate the vision Empower others to act on the vision
Plan for short-term wins

Improve on the changes Institutionalize new approaches

handle the unexpected challenges brought on by a global market and fast-paced technological advances.

This article has provided a commonality view of change and transition modes in hopes of presenting additional insights into how they are still relevant today in dealing with the ever-changing organization world. Managing change is definitely a challenge but not impossible, linking together possible solutions can only lead to improved ways to handle changes and transitions and open up the possibility of new and improved methods not yet discovered.

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